"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (John 10:11 ESV).

It is popular among past and present evangelical Christian writers to assert that the famous Reformer and Theologian John Calvin advocated the doctrine of universal atonement. By this it is espoused that Calvin believed and taught that the extent of the sacrificial death on the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ was to atone for the sins of every individual who lived universally. In this view, and to substantiate this view, a number of direct quotations are taken from Calvin's writings. As a result of this position, a frequent and perhaps cynical question often asked in studies involving John Calvin's teaching on atonement is, "Was Calvin a Calvinist?"

In addition to the numerous authors indicated above, other evangelical Christian scholars, those adhering to what has become known as a Calvinistic doctrinal understanding of Holy Scripture, have written to support Calvin adhering to a "limited atonement." By this, it is espoused that Calvin believed and taught that the extent of the sacrificial death on the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ was to atone for the sins of those God graciously chose for eternal life before the foundations of the world. In this view, God's Elect covenant people's sins are fully and completely atoned for by the work of the Saviour at Calvary. These writers declare that the Elect of God only experiences the propitiatory benefits of the cross of Christ and that the "Good Shepherd" laid down his life specifically for His "sheep," i.e., believers. Several direct quotations are also taken from Calvin's writings to substantiate this view of the Reformer's teaching.

Ultimately, of course, what is of importance is not what John Calvin believed, or did not believe, regarding the extent of this precious biblical doctrine. What the Word of God teaches on this important subject is of supreme importance! What has God revealed to His people that they may better grow in the grace and knowledge of their beloved Redeemer? This was certainly Calvin's utmost concern, evident throughout his printed sermons and abundant writings.

The objective of this paper is to interact with authors who use John Calvin as an example of a Reformer who held to a general or unlimited atonement. It will be shown that far too often in the debate on the extent of the atonement, confusion is created between one's position on the extent of the atonement and the biblical warrant of the free offer of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to

all mankind. The purpose of this paper is not to substantiate the reformed teaching on particular redemption. It is also not the purpose of this paper to attempt to substantiate the non-reformed teaching on general redemption. Instead, it will be shown that Calvin did not engage in a comprehensive argument supporting or against the doctrine of limited atonement. In the words of Dr. Roger Nicole, "A full discussion of the scope of the atonement is not found in Calvin's writings, and the assessment of his position in this area has varied."[1] It will be shown that the current debate on limited versus unlimited atonement was not a central theme in the lifetime of John Calvin. This paper will finally seek to substantiate that, too often, writers and commentators tend to read their own views of the extent of the Atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ in Calvin's writings. It is the belief of the author of this paper that to state Calvin's support for universal atonement categorically is a misrepresentation of history and not beneficial to the edification of the Christian Church in the 21st century!

Historical Context

In 1610, forty-six years after the death of John Calvin (1509 – 1564), the followers of a Dutch seminary professor named James Arminius wrote five articles of faith, a summary of theological doctrines based on the teachings of Arminius. To modify the Belgic Confession of Faith and the Heidelberg Catechism, these five articles were submitted as a protest to the Church of Holland. The second of the five protests addresses the extent of the atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ and can be succinctly summarized as follows: "Christ died for all men and for every man, although only believers are saved." [2] These five articles submitted to the Church of Holland stirred in the early 17th century. As a result of this controversy, in 1618, the Dutch Reformed Church assembled and conducted meetings to address the doctrinal teachings of Arminianism. These meetings are historically known as the Synod of Dort. Each of the Arminian five "points" were addressed individually and refuted by the representatives at the Synod of Dort. Of particular interest to this paper is the Synod's summary of the extent of the work of the atonement.

[1] Roger Nicole, "John Calvin's View of the Extent of the Atonement," *A Puritan's Mind*, http://www.apuritansmind.com/arminianism/john-calvins-view-of-limited-atonement(accessed November 17, 2012)
[2] David Steele et al., *The Five Points of Calvinism* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1963), 2

In response to the Arminian statement concerning an "unlimited" or universal atonement, the Synod concluded that Christ Jesus died specifically for those predestined to eternal life. In other words, unlike Arminian theology, which states that atonement made salvation *possible* for the sinner, the Dordt representatives concluded that the atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ *secured* salvation for all those appointed unto eternal life. In reference to the Arminian theology of the atonement, Daniel Steele writes, "They hold that Christ's saving work was designed to make possible the salvation of all men on condition that they believe, but that Christ's death in itself did not actually secure or guarantee salvation for anyone."[3]

The outcome of the Synod of Dort produced what is commonly known today as "The Five Points of Calvinism." This doctrinal summary is used often today even though John Calvin had nothing to do with the formulation of it! Nevertheless, many authors today directly link Calvin with the five points of Calvinism! This is unfortunate because what seems clear from Calvin's voluminous writings is that his focus when writing about the atonement was not on the actual extent of the atonement. His language when speaking on this topic cannot conclusively be interpreted to mean he held to a universal or limited understanding of the atonement.

It should be acknowledged that the debate regarding the extent of the atonement was not prominent during Calvin's lifetime. This is not to say that the debate was not present before and during his lifetime. Dr. Nicole writes in reference to the extent of the atonement both before and during the Calvin era, "It must be owned, of course, that the question had received some attention before Calvin. Notably, Gottschalk, in the ninth century, had given express support to definite atonement, and the scholastics had discussed the topic and advanced a partial resolution in asserting that Christ's death was sufficient for all men and efficient for the elect."[4] Along with historical references that Calvin would have been well aware of, contemporaries of Calvin in the later part of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries wrote in support of a definite or particular atonement. Names such as Peter Martyr (1499-1562), Theodore Beza (1519-1605), and William Ames (1576-1633) are just a few theologians that could be listed as strong adherents to limited atonement. Once again, in the words of Dr. Nicole, speaking of these contemporaries, "As far as we know, they did not assert that they were conscious of differing

[3] Ibid.,40
[4] Roger Nicole, "John Calvin's View of the Extent of the Atonement," *A Puritan's Mind*, http://www.apuritansmind.com/arminianism/john-calvins-view-of-limited-atonement(accessed November 23, 2012)

with Calvin on this score, nor did Calvin take issue in writing with any of those who formulated the view during his lifetime." [5]

Surely, modern-day writers who speak confidently of John Calvin's support of a universal atonement must address this historical reality! Would such an astute theologian and scholar as Calvin fail to contend with his like-minded brethren if he strongly disagreed with them? Certainly, that would be out of character for someone as clear-minded, and shall we say tenacious when dealing with Holy Scripture as the famous Geneva Reformer! In his classic work entitled *The Reformers: and the Theology of the Reformation*, William Cunningham provides the perspective and position that this paper adopts. Speaking of John Calvin's writings as they pertain to the extent of the atonement, Cunningham states, "We admit, however, that he has not usually given any distinct indication, that he believed in any limitation as to the objects of the atonement; and that upon a survey of all that has been produced from his writings, there is fair ground for a difference of opinion as to what his doctrine upon this point really was."[6] Dr. Cunningham's perspective and summary comment on this question of Calvin's understanding of the extent of the atonement will serve as the foundational presupposition of this paper. We shall now interact with modern-day writers who unequivocally maintain John Calvin's adherence to universal atonement.

Against Calvinism

In recent years a number of books have come out on the market which have as their primary objective a refutation of historical Calvinism. One such book is written by Roger E. Olson and is entitled *Against Calvinism*. Mr. Olsen has no hesitation in declaring that John Calvin held a universal position on the atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ. In an argument against a lecture given by a particular Calvinist speaker, the author argues against the charge that non-Calvinists limit the atonement. The author uses John Calvin to substantiate his argument. He writes, "This frequently heard complaint simply doesn't hold water because even Calvin did not believe the atonement saved anyone until certain conditions are met, namely repentance and faith. "[7] Excluding comment on the fact that reformed Christians believe in faith and repentance,

[5] Ibid
[6] William Cunningham, "The Reformers: And the Theology of the Reformation," http://books.google.com/books?id=EY9_tQLQb64C&pg=PP6#v=onepage&q&f=false (accessed December 4, 2012)
[7] Roger E. Olsen, Against Calvinism (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 137,138

though gifts of God are mandatory to salvation, it is interesting to note that the author does not substantiate his claims with his own research on John Calvin! He does provide quotes researched by other non-Calvinist authors who agree with Mr. Olsen's belief in the atonement.

One like-minded author provided by Roger Olsen to substantiate support for his belief that Calvin was an adherent to general redemption is Kevin D. Kennedy. In an article Kennedy wrote entitled *Calvin and Calvinism,* the author reflects on what he describes as the "Universal Atonement in Calvin's Polemical Writings." In Calvin's writings on disagreements with other theologians who held to universal atonement, Kennedy argues that Calvin does not argue against that position. Kennedy writes, "Were Calvin a proponent of limited atonement, one would expect that in his disagreements with other theologians, he would have taken the opportunity to argue for this position when combating the beliefs of those who affirmed universal atonement. Upon examination, however, this proves not to be the case. For example, it has been widely recognized that in Calvin's refutation of the decrees from the Council of Trent, he did not disagree with the statement on universal atonement. Indeed, he specifically mentions the decree dealing with the extent of the atonement and states that he agrees with it. Calvin quotes the decree as follows: "Him God set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world. . . But though he died for all, all do not benefit from his death, but only those to whom the merit of his passion is communicated." The wording in this statement is explicitly universal regarding the atonement, yet Calvin indicates no disagreement with it. Had Calvin held to particular redemption, it is difficult to believe that he would not have taken the opportunity to dispute the Roman Church on this point."[8]

How does one respond to examples given by writers indicating Calvin may have adhered to universal redemption? Certainly, there is no denying that a few of Calvin's statements can lead one to the conclusion that was his position. However, it is not as simple as that! The difficulty in categorically stating Calvin held to that belief is the many other writings in which Calvin implies that the atoning work of Christ was specifically for the Elect. One example is Calvin's own words from his commentary on I John 2:2. "He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world." (ESV) This, of course, is a favorite text of Armenians and other Christians who hold to a theology stating that Christ suffered and died universally for everyone who ever lived or ever will live. Speaking of the Apostle's words in I

[8] Kevin D. Kennedy, "Calvin and Calvinism," http://calvinandcalvinism.com/?p=9440 (accessed December 1, 2012)

John 2:2, “not for ours only,” Calvin wrote the following, “He added this for the sake of amplifying so that the faithful might be assured that the expiation made by Christ, extends to all who by faith embrace the gospel. Here, a question may be raised: how have the whole world's sins been expiated? I pass by the dotages of the fanatics, who, under the pretense, extend salvation to all the reprobate and, therefore, to Satan himself. Such a monstrous thing deserves no refutation. They who seek to avoid this absurdity have said Christ suffered sufficiently for the whole world but efficiently only for the elect. This solution has commonly prevailed in schools. Though then I allow that what has been said is true, I deny that it is suitable to this passage, for the design of John was no other than to make this benefit common to the whole Church. Then, under the word *all* or whole, he does not include the reprobate but designates those who should believe and those who were then scattered through various parts of the world.” [9] This language of Calvin is clear in this comment that he believed our Lord Jesus Christ suffered and died for those “who by faith embrace the gospel.” Who are they that by faith embrace the gospel other than those who are elect in Christ? They are those elected by God in the past but who, over time, embrace Christ by faith and repentance!

Regarding the above 1 John 2:2 passage, Roger Olsen again quotes from Kevin Kennedy. Olsen points out supporters of limited atonement are very quick to point to 1 John 2:2 as an example of Calvin’s adherence to limited atonement. In response, Olsen quotes Kennedy, who comments on Calvin’s interpretation of the passage by saying, “Calvin was simply trying to avoid any interpretation of the verse as teaching universal salvation.”[10] Olsen comments on this statement from Kennedy, saying, “Besides, he rightly points out that one passage out of many that deal with the extent of the atonement should hardly be taken to contradict the rest.”[11]. Is that really the case? Is it fair or accurate for the author to give the impression that Calvin’s comments on I John 2:2 are somehow unique among the vast writings of the French Reformer? This does not seem to be the case! In reflecting on the prayerful words of the Lord Jesus Christ in John 17:2, “to all whom you have given him,” Calvin seems once again to indicate a definite grace for those who belong to the Saviour (i.e., Church). Calvin writes, “Christ does not say that he has been made Governor over the whole world, in order to bestow life on all without any distinction;

[9] John Calvin, I John (Calvin’s Commentaries XXII; trans. John Owen; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 172,173.
[10] Olsen, Against Calvinism, 147
[11] Ibid

but he limits this grace to those who *have been given to him*. But how were they given to him? For the Father has subjected to him the reprobate. I reply that only the elect belongs to his peculiar flock, which he has undertaken to guard as a Shepherd."[12] Again, this comment seems at odds with those who claim Calvin's universal redemption position with certainty.

There is another statement from Calvin that again seems to be at odds with Olsen's certainty of the Reformer's belief in universal redemption. In one well-known theological treaty writing on the Lord's Supper, Calvin gives credence to those who adhere to limited atonement. Calvin is responding to the teachings of a staunch Lutheran defender of the bodily presence of Christ during the Lord's Supper. In a well-known treaty entitled *The Clear Explanation of Sound Doctrine Concerning the True Partaking of the Flesh and Blood of Christ in the Holy Supper, Calvin wrote* a defense for only believers participating in the Lord's Supper. In this paper, he wrote, "I should like to know how the wicked can eat the flesh of Christ which was not crucified for them, and how they can drink the blood which was not shed to expiate their sins?"[13] When reading this remark from Calvin's treatise, one must then ask is it appropriate for anyone to assert with any certainty Calvin's supposed belief that the Lord Jesus suffered and died for those who ultimately will be condemned for their sins? One can also reasonably ask how valuable this debate around Calvin is within the Christian Church.

Whosoever Will

On November 6th and 7, 2008, a conference convened at the First Baptist Church of Woodstock, GA. This gathering of Christian ministers and believers was called the John 3:16 Conference. The Conference was sponsored by Jerry Vines Ministries, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary, Luther Rice Seminary, and Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. According to the Baptist Press website, the conference was held for the following reason, "The John 3:16 Conference, described by organizers as a biblical and theological assessment of and response to five-point Calvinism..."[14] One outcome of this conference was the compilation in book form of

[12] John Calvin, I John (Calvin's Commentaries XVIII; trans. William Pringle; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 165.
[13] John Calvin, Calvin: Theological Treatises Vol. XXII, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1954), 285
[14] Don Beehler, "John 3:16 Conference Examines Calvinism," *Baptist Press*, http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?id=29318 (accessed December 2, 2012)

various lectures and sermons presented at the conference. The name of this book is entitled *Whosoever Will.* The book is edited by David L. Allen and Steve W. Lemke, and the ultimate objective, per the editors, is to critique the five points of Calvinism. David Allen, in his chapter entitled The *Atonement, Limited or Universal?* Another writer is anxious to prove that John Calvin is a subscriber to universal atonement. One example Allen offers to validate his understanding of Calvin is a reference to the French Reformer's last will and testament. Mr. Allen writes the following. "In Calvin's last will and testament, he clearly affirmed a form of universal atonement."[15] The author then provides a small section of Calvin's will. "I testify and declare that as a suppliant, I humbly implore of him to grant me to be so washed and purified by the blood of that sovereign Redeemer, shed for the sins of the human race, that I may be permitted to stand before his tribunal in the image of the Redeemer himself."[16] Dr. Roger Nicole provides a helpful comment on this statement found within John Calvin's last will and testament. Dr. Nicole is commenting on the specific section of the will referenced above. He writes, "The French original reads "shed for all poor sinners," and the absence of the article might favor the connotation "all kinds of poor sinners." The point of Calvin appears here not to be whether Christ offered himself for the whole race or for the redeemed only—a matter that would scarcely be relevant to the last will and testament—but rather that Calvin's hope of justification rested in God's willingness to receive "poor sinners" among whom Calvin did not hesitate to number himself."[17] Certainly, no one disputes Calvin's usage of universal language in many of his writings. "All," "many," "the world," etc are familiar terms in Calvin's writing. Certainly, they are familiar terms in the Word of God! The Calvinist or the Armenian must not shy away from such terms. These words always point to the broad appeal that the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ must be given! The message of the Word of God is that Christ Jesus can and must be offered to all sinners! None should be restricted from hearing that "there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:12). Calvin's final will and testament is simply a reflection of the man who gave himself so valiantly to preaching the Word of God! The language of Scripture was at the core of his

[15] Allen, David. Whosoever Will, Edited by David Allen and Steve W. Lemke, .(Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010),70
[16] Ibid
[17] Roger Nicole, "John Calvin's View of the Extent of the Atonement," *A Puritan's Mind*, http://www.apuritansmind.com/arminianism/john-calvins-view-of-limited-atonement(accessed December 3, 2012)

being! Charles Spurgeon, the well-known Baptist Calvinist preacher, speaking of the beloved Christian writer John Bunyan, once said of Bunyan, "If you pricked him, he'd bleed Bibline."[18] Calvin was built from the same cloth as Bunyan! How to use those words in his last will and testament as substantial evidence he held to universal atonement is astonishing and disappointing! This is especially true in light of Dr. Nicole's comments provided above.

Roger Allen continues his efforts to demonstrate Calvin's belief in an unlimited atonement. He uses Calvin's commentary on the book of Isaiah, chapter 53, verse 6. The following text is referenced using the King James Version. "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way, and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all." Allen writes, "Calvin's discussion in both his commentary and his sermon on the use of "all" in Isa 53:6 clearly makes no distinction in usage. "All" like sheep strayed, and on the Servant was laid the sin of us "all." All without exception had sinned, and the sin of all without exception had been laid on the suffering Servant. Calvin further says: "By adding the term 'each one,' he (the author of Isaiah) descends from a universal statement, in which he included all, to a particular, that each person may consider in his own mind whether it is so...all men are included, without any exception. Calvin says "many" means "all in Isa 53:12."[19]

In the above passage from the prophet Isaiah, we once again see in the writings of Calvin language that might lend one to declare the Reformer held to universal redemption. However, Calvin does not consistently apply the term "all" to every specific individual when discussing the application of the death of the Lord Jesus Christ. While commenting on the New Testament letter of the Apostle Paul to Timothy using I Tim 2:5 as the text, Calvin makes the following statement, "The universal term *all* must always be referred to classes of men, and not only to persons; of humble rank, but princes also, were redeemed by the death of Christ."[20] Certainly, when speaking of the work of Christ throughout the word of God, all races and classes of mind are urged to come to believe in the Saviour. There are no restrictions to this free offer of the gospel. There is no contradiction in stating that Christ is available for all if they repent of their sins and believe while also stating Christ specifically died for His people. Here, another

[18] Jeff Wencel, "Bunyan's Bibline Blood," *Crumbs Fallen from the Table of the King-from His Word, His Workmen, and His World*, http://jeffwencel.blogspot.com/2012/01/bunyans-bibline-blood.html(accessed December 3, 2012)
[19] Allen, Whosoever Will, 71
[20] John Calvin, I Timothy (Calvin's Commentaries XXI; trans. William Pringle; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 57.

reference from Roger Nicole is very helpful. Dr. Nicole is responding to those who confuse Calvin's biblical stand on the free offer of the Gospel with believing Calvin must have held to universal redemption. "In asserting, as he repeatedly does, the legitimacy of a universal, indiscriminate offer of salvation to any and to all, Calvin, they urge, presupposes a universal atonement as the logical, necessary foundation for such a call. To this, we acknowledge readily that Calvin does indeed assert the propriety of, yea, the divine mandate for an indiscriminate call to salvation addressed to all human beings that may be reached by language. We furthermore believe that Calvin was right in line with Scripture and that those who would restrict the call to the elect are mistaken. But the proposition that the prerequisite for an indiscriminate call is a universal provision, which is the base of the whole argument, appears to us palpably and demonstrably false. Most of the well-meant offers and invitations, human and divine, are not grounded in coextensive provision! All that is requisite for a well-meant offer is that, if the terms of the offer be complied with, that which was offered will, in fact, be delivered. This occurs precisely with the gospel (John 6:37), but no one fulfills the terms except those whom the Father draws (John 6:44, 65). Whether or not God has made a provision for those who do not come has nothing to do with the sincerity of the offer. No solid argument can, therefore, be built in favor of universal atonement on this basis."[21] This seems to be the crux of the matter in this debate! It is also a common complaint of Christians who do not hold to particular redemption. How can we (Calvinists) freely offer in good conscience Christ to lost sinners if we know there is a possibility that Christ did NOT die for that sinner? The obvious response to that question is that we have no idea who will and will not be drawn by faith to the Lord Jesus Christ. In the same way, no one knows who the Elect in Christ is! The Christian is to obey the "Great Commission" and declare the good news of Jesus Christ to all. A belief that the Lord Jesus gave His life for the "sheep" does not in any way limit the free gospel offer! On the contrary, it promotes a desire to share the gospel with all, knowing that the "sheep" will respond in true repentance and faith! They will respond by the grace and power of a Sovereign God!

[21] Roger Nicole, "John Calvin's View of the Extent of the Atonement," *A Puritan's Mind*, http://www.apuritansmind.com/arminianism/john-calvins-view-of-limited-atonement(accessed December 3, 2012

Salvation and Sovereignty - A Molinist Approach

There is an undercurrent at work today within evangelical Christianity that has desired and produced what some consider a viable alternative to traditional biblical Calvinism. An alternative, some say, does not have the "baggage" identified with historical Arminianisn. This alternative is known as Molinism (named after a 16th-century Jesuit priest, Luis Molina). Molinists believe in the sovereignty of God in salvation but, at the same time, are strong advocates of libertarianism (free will). One Molinist adherent writes, "Molinism formulates a radical "compatibilism"—a Calvinist view of divine sovereignty and an Arminian view of human freedom."[22] One proponent of this theological system writes, "There is an alternative to Calvinism called Molinism, which provides answers to these three biblical and logically consistent quandaries."[23] What are the "quandaries" that the writer is referencing? The same author writes, "Calvinism has at least three dilemmas: (1) reconciling God's sovereign election of individuals with his genuine desire for the salvation of all; (2) adhering to a deterministic view of sovereignty without blaming God for the fall of Adam; and (3) adhering to limited atonement and irresistible grace while also affirming that the gospel is genuinely offered to everyone."[24] This writer and others who adhere to "Molinism" fail to recognize that for most Calvinists, these are not dilemmas at all! No reconciliation is required when it comes to the sovereign activity of God. On the contrary, mankind should be humbled in adoration and awe regarding God's sovereign work in the salvation of sinners! This is particularly true regarding God's electing grace and the work of Jesus Christ on the cross. While the Calvinist believes in a definite atonement securing salvation for the Elect in Christ, at the same time also believes in a genuine offer of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to all people. The two are NOT in contradiction to one another. In fact, many Calvinists believe that it is because God has elected many people beyond number that the Gospel must be so freely proclaimed!

Some Molinist Christians quickly claim John Calvin as one of their own! Or, shall we say, at least as it relates to Calvin's supposedly inconclusive position on the extent of the Atonement! Kenneth Keathley, an advocate and proponent of Molinism, questions the appropriateness of linking the TULIP acronym (Five Points of Calvinism) with John Calvin

[22] Kenneth Keathley, Salvation and Sovereignty a Molinist Approach (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010), 5
[23] Ibid., 4
[24] Ibid

himself. Mr. Keathley writes, "If Calvin did not hold to limited atonement, it would not automatically mean that doctrine was wrong. But it would call into question whether or not the TULIP paradigm was the proper way to present any soteriology that went by the name of Calvinism."[25] Surely, most Calvinists view Calvinism as far broader than just the five points assigned to the TULIP label! Most view Calvinism as a biblical worldview with the Sovereign God at the heart of it! J. I Packer, in his wonderful Introductory Essay to John Owens's *Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, makes this point for us."It would not be correct simply to equate Calvinism with the "five points." Calvinism is something much broader than the "five points" indicate. Calvinism is a worldview stemming from a clear vision of God as the world's Maker and King. Calvinism is consistently acknowledging the Creator as Lord, working all things after the counsel of God's Word. Calvinism, in other words, is the theology of the Bible viewed from the perspective of the Bible. This God-centred outlook sees the Creator as the source, means, and end of everything that is, both nature and grace. The five points assert no more than that God is sovereign in saving the individual, but Calvinism, as such, is concerned with the much broader assertion that He is sovereign everywhere."[26] This is the essence of Calvinism! It is so much more than the TULIP label! Yet, sadly, that is often all that the non-Calvinist can see!

A Sound Approach

This paper has attempted to show the inappropriateness of many modern-day Christians to claim John Calvin as an unreserved adherent of universal redemption—the argument, at best, serves no purpose, and at worst, it is historically inaccurate. In John Calvin's famous *Institutes of the Christian Religion,* the author does NOT directly address the extent of the atonement of our Lord Jesus Christ. This in itself should cause Christian writers on both sides of the issue to hesitate in claiming what exactly Calvin believed and did not believe. This is not to say that Calvin did not write on the atonement. Quite the contrary! In the *Institutes,* he wrote at great length on the work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The remaining section of this paper examines a sound and practical approach to addressing this debate. The approach summarizes Robert A. Peterson's conclusion of his

[25] Ibid., 192
[26] J. I. Packer, "Introductory Essay to John Owens's Death of Death in the Death of Christ," *A Puritan's Mind*, http://www.all-of-grace.org/pub/others/deathofdeath.html (accessed December 7, 2012)

excellent study entitled *Calvin and the Atonement*. Mr. Peterson's work details Calvin's vast writings on the atonement. His work begins with the atonement stemming from the depths of God's abundant love. He next addresses the great mystery of the incarnation of the God-man. He then moves on to Christ's three-fold office of prophet, priest, and the great king. Of note is John Calvin's belief in Jesus Christ as the legal substitute for his people who was obedient on their behalf.

The richness and fullness of Calvin's doctrine of atonement reveals profound insight and offers great blessings and benefits to the Christian church. Peterson points his readers to Calvin's *Institutes,* which speak of the merit of Jesus Christ applied to the believer. Calvin writes, "By his obedience, however, Christ acquired and merited grace for us with his Father. Many passages of Scripture surely and firmly attest to this. I take it to be commonplace that if Christ made satisfaction for our sins, if he paid the penalty owed for us, if he appeased God by his obedience, in short, if a righteous man suffered for the unrighteous men – then he acquired salvation for us by his righteousness, which is tantamount to deserving it."[27] Christ merited grace for His People! What great blessings upon the people of God! How small the debate is on whether Calvin believed in limited or unlimited atonement when we read these words! Surely, many today who are caught in this debate are missing the meat of the Word that the reformer brings to the Church of Jesus Christ!

Robert Peterson's summary is fair and right-minded. He writes, "It would be a mistake, however, for readers to conclude that people reach their conclusions on Calvin's view of the extent of the atonement merely because they want to claim him for their own theology. These matters are more complicated than that! There is evidence in Calvin that both 'sides' can claim their own evidence of two kinds. First, there are statements concerning the extent of the atonement itself. Calvin's commentaries contain some passages that favor limited atonement, but the data is insubstantial. Conversely, James W. Anderson has shown evidence from Calvin's sermons that he taught unlimited atonement. An important point that will be developed later but worth mentioning is that scholars rarely appeal to the Institutes when arguing Calvin's position. The second kind of evidence adduced by those who claim that Calvin advocates a view on the extent of the atonement is from systematic theology. Scholars point to doctrines taught by Calvin that seem to fit very well with limited or unlimited atonement, respectively. Those espousing

[27] John Calvin, Institutes of Christian Religion, Book 2 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press,1960),530

unlimited atonement point to 'universal' themes in Calvin: his affirmation of the importance of evangelism and clear belief in a universal and free offer to the gospel. Those committed to limited atonement cite Calvin's 'particular' themes: his assertion of double predestination and his emphasis on the efficacy of Christ's saving work."[28]

As stated earlier in this paper, the extent of the Atonement was not a frequent subject of discussion in Calvin's day. This is to say that to expend so much effort in today's church to prove Calvin believed in a universal or a limited atonement is not something that ultimately can be certified. How nobler and profitable an effort is to study Calvin's rich and abundant writings on the design and execution of the atonement of the blessed Savior! One must never confuse Calvin's writings, or more importantly in the Word of God, the broad offering of the gospel of Jesus Christ, with a belief that someone adheres to universal or limited redemption. It is a terrible mistake of the non-Calvinist to charge the Calvinist in limiting the gospel offer because they believe Christ Jesus suffered and paid for the penalty for the elect. On the contrary, the gospel "seed" must be abundantly cast upon all mankind. May the God in whom salvation is accomplished and applied grant multitudes to know the blessings of the atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ!

[28] Robert A. Peterson Sr., Calvin and the Atonement (London: Christian Focus Publications , 1999),117

Bibliography

1. Allen, David and Steve Lemke. *Whosoever Will*. Nashville: B&H Academics,2010

2. Beehler, Don "John 3:16 Conference Examines Calvinism," *Baptist Press*, http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?id=29318 (accessed December 2, 2012)

3. Calvin, John. John 12-21 Calvin's Commentaries XVIII; trans. William Pringle; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979

4. Calvin, John. I & II Timothy Calvin's Commentaries XXI; trans. John Owen; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979

5. Calvin, John. I John Calvin's Commentaries XXI; trans. John Owen; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979

6. Calvin, John. Calvin: Theological Treatises XXII; trans. J. Reid; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1954

7. Calvin, John. *Institutes of Christian Religion Book II*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960

8. Keathley, Kenneth. *Salvation and Sovereignty A Molinist Approach*. Nashville: B&H Academic , 2010

9. Nicole, Roger, "John Calvin's View of the Extent of the Atonement," *A Puritan's Mind*, http://www.apuritansmind.com/arminianism/john-calvins-view-of-limited-atonement(accessed December 3, 2012

10. Olson, Robert E. *Against Calvinism*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011

11. Packer, James "Introductory Essay to John Owens's Death of Death in the Death of Christ," *A Puritan's Mind*, http://www.all-of-grace.org/pub/others/deathofdeath.html (accessed December 7, 2012)

12. Peterson Sr., Robert. *Calvin and the Atonement*. London: Christian Focus Publications, 1999

13. Steele, David N., Curtis C. Thomas, S. Lance Quinee., *The Five Points of Calvinism: Defined, Defended, Documented.* Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1963.

14. Wencel, Jeff, "Bunyan's Bibline Blood," *Crumbs Fallen from the Table of the King-from His Word, His Workmen, and His World*, http://jeffwencel.blogspot.com/2012/01/bunyans-bibline-blood.html(accessed December 3, 2012)